Building Guardians to Create a Better Community

By Sue Rahr
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As a profession, law enforcement has become very good at fighting crime. The FBI stats have proved it over the past several years.

Yet, as a profession, we are struggling. And much of it, though unintentional, is self-inflicted.

While we have done a great job attacking the disease in the community that is violent crime, the way some have carried out the effort has damaged the immune system built on public trust. The results have been eye-opening and are tremendously important: it turns out most people care more about how they are treated than the crime rate – a phenomenon demonstrated over decades of social science research.

We shouldn't be surprised by that. Who enjoys being conquered? Demeaned? Intimidated?

The results explain the negative cloud that has engulfed policing in this country and the growing divide between cops and citizens. Some communities fear police rather than seeing them as a source of protection and help.

So how did we get here?

The reasons are many. But from my perspective the roots are found in the type of training that has become the norm in many parts of the country. A few years ago, when I returned to the police academy in Washington State where I graduated 33 years earlier, I was immediately struck by the changed environment. Recruits snapped to attention every time they encountered a staff member. What? Police officers don't salute their superiors in the station or on the street. That is a function reserved for formal ceremonies and memorial services. The recruit's first day on campus was known as the "tune up" day, a simulated version of hell week at a military academy.

It was here in my old training grounds that I recognized the seeds of militarization of police culture. And it made little sense to me.

I asked, "Why were we training police recruits like soldiers?" Our missions are completely different. Soldiers conquer. Police protect. Recruits are not unruly 18-year-olds who need to be broken and rebuilt. Today's police recruits are typically men and women in their mid-20s. Ten percent are from an older generation. We have recruits with law degrees; former school teachers; real estate agents; business owners; all looking for a job that matters. These are not people who need to be controlled by threats, humiliation and fear. They don't need the physical punishment of "drop and give me 20!" to correct mistakes.

The behavior I saw modeled by trainers conveyed the wrong message about power and authority. Those without power must submit to those with power. The consequence for mistakes and failure to follow orders were immediate and physical.

How should we have expected that to translate in the field?

The answer is pretty clear as we are seeing it too often in the field. We are preparing warriors to fight an enemy rather than guardians to protect and serve. If this was the type of training I had received years ago, I would have walked away. You give me gun and lethal authority but not the respect to manage my own behavior? No thank you.

When I took the position of Director of the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, I immersed myself in the science and literature related to adult learning. I learned that fear and unpredictable stress was not only counterproductive to learning, but also created a culture that celebrated disrespect for people without power.

It just didn't make sense. I raised my concerns with the staff at the academy. I initially received resistance from some, ranging from skepticism to outright rejection. A number of seasoned trainers, however, expressed relief, stating, "It's about time!" They had long been ready to let go of the façade of boot camp. For some, however, their resistance was based on their belief that we needed to toughen-up recruits. But 5 months is not adequate to change a weak recruit into a tough recruit. That's a hiring issue.

Many Chiefs and Sheriffs from around the state expressed support for socializing new recruits in a culture that was more conducive to community policing. Others, however, were skeptical – some were quietly outraged.

After much cajoling, and after gaining the support of my 14, governor appointed Commissioners, I drew a line in the sand and established a starting point for changing the protocols. Beginning with class No. 689 in January 2013 we ceased using push-ups and humiliation as a behavior control strategy and recruits were no longer required to snap to attention when walking down the hall. Instead of saluting, recruits were required to make eye contact and initiate a conversation whenever they passed someone in the hallways – giving them hundreds of repetitions of practice in a skill that is often lacking in our millennial recruits.

The trainers that didn't support this new approach left. New trainers that understood and supported the new culture couldn't wait to join.

Over time, we built a dynamic cadre of trainers - some veteran, some new - all deeply committed to our new culture and training strategies. We modified the curriculum to include expanded crisis intervention training and de-escalation skills. Firearms and defensive tactics have been integrated, expanded and infused with stress management skills drawn from the "Blue Courage" program. Strategically applied stress drills have been applied to build

confidence. Critical thinking and decision making are the focus of final testing rather than memorization.

Although these changes were largely based in common sense, I knew they would be a big deal for those steeped in tradition and enamored with the vision of a cop as a warrior. Much to my chagrin, the President and informal leader of Class 689 just happened to be a decorated military hero, a Black Hawk helicopter pilot. I feared I would not be able to enlist his personal support for this new culture. Much to my surprise and relief, when I shared my plans with him he said, "Ma'am, if I wanted to be a warrior, I would have stayed in the army. I'm here because I want to be a guardian."

It turns out most our military vets really "get it" when it comes this culture shift. This is most evident during our distribution of personal copies of the Constitution to recruits during their first week on campus. We talk about the military heroes who have given their lives to defend the constitution and how cops who violate the constitution dishonor that sacrifice.

The symbols and artifacts around campus and the friendly discourse between recruits and staff and visitors convey a culture steeped in respect and openness. Wall murals of the constitution, inspirational posters, and class mottos convey a spirit of patriotism, honor, and service.

That doesn't mean we are building a new generation of wimpy cops. Our trainees learn the best strategies for defending themselves and when necessary, using force effectively and decisively. We reinforce that guardians must possess the skills of warriors and not hesitate to use them when necessary.

In the end, success is best found when they all work together, respectfully, as a cohesive unit, which ultimately is what we all want - a community that exists for each other.

Sue Rahr joined the King County Sheriff's Office as a deputy in 1979 and for 25 years worked her way up through the ranks until she was elected Sheriff in 2005. She served as Sheriff for seven years, retiring in 2012. She was responsible for managing over 1,000 employees, a $150 million budget, and contract police services to 12 cities and transit policing for the Seattle/Puget Sound region.